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News Release

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Greater Amberjack to be Managed Under Trip Limits and a Quota

On August 22 the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council finalized Amendment 9 to the Snapper Grouper Fishery Management Plan and approved it for submission to the Secretary of Commerce. The amendment must be approved by the Secretary before it may be implemented.

After considering public testimony, the council made several modifications to the document in an attempt to achieve additional reductions in fishing mortality required by recent amendments to the Magnuson-Stevens Act while minimizing short-term impacts on industry. One modification dealt with the proposed aggregate three-month closure of the snapper grouper fishery. The council opted to deal with closures on a species by species basis for gag, black grouper, greater amberjack and red porgy in lieu of the three month aggregate closure.

The following list contains final actions approved in Amendment 9:

RED PORGY, GAG, and BLACK GROUPE

The council voted to prohibit harvest and possession in excess of the recreational bag limit during March and April and prohibit purchase and sale during March and April. These measures would apply to red porgy, gag and black grouper in or from federal waters, harvested by a permitted vessel (commercial or charter/headboat) without regard to where the fish is harvested or possessed. The prohibition on purchase would apply to all permitted dealers without regard to where the fish is harvested or possessed.

In addition, the following increased minimum size limits and recreational bag limits for these species were approved:

RED PORGY: 14" TL, 5-fish bag limit; BLACK SEA BASS: 10" TL, 20 -fish bag limit; VERMILION SNAPPER 11" TL (recreational only, commercial is currently at 12" TL); GAG: 24" TL; and BLACK GROUPE: 24" TL.

GREATER AMBERJACK

The council voted to reduce the recreational bag limit to one fish per person per day; prohibit coring; prohibit harvest and possession in excess of the recreational bag limit during April; implement a 1,000 pound trip limit the rest of the year; Establish a quota of 63 percent of the 1995 landings (1,169, 931 pounds), and begin the fishing year on May 1; and prohibit commercial and bag limit sale of greater amberjack when the season closes.

BLACK SEA BASS

Measures requiring the use of escape vents and degradable escape panels in bass pots were approved by the council.

Amendment 9 will also:

Specify that within the 5-fish aggregate grouper recreational bag limit, no more than two may be gag or black grouper; establish an aggregate recreational bag limit of 20 fish inclusive of all snapper grouper species currently not under a bag limit, excluding tomtates and bluerunners which are commonly used as bait; and specify that vessels with longline gear aboard may only possess the following species: snowy grouper, warsaw grouper, yellowedge grouper, misty grouper, golden, blueline, and sand tilefish.

Amendment 9 will be submitted to the Secretary of Commerce for approval and implementation in October, 1997.

South Atlantic Council to Request Lead Designation in Dolphin-Fish Management

The council voted August 21 to request designation as lead council for management of dolphin and wahoo. Upon Secretarial approval, management measures for these species could be developed to ensure they are protected throughout the Atlantic coast, the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean.

After lengthy public comment during a scoping meeting the week of August 18, the council decided to proceed with management, and directed staff to include a full range of management alternatives in a draft fishery management plan. Options will include an even allocation between commercial and recreational fishermen, or a split based on historical participation in the fishery, as well as other alternatives. These options will also address gear restrictions. Staff was also directed to compile reports on dolphin biology and migration.

Other options under consideration for dolphin management are reporting requirements to gain a better understanding as to how many fishermen are targeting this species and to help with stock assessments, and the development of a framework procedure that will allow the council to set and adjust annual catch limits. Also discussed was the possibility of implementing a limited access system for the fishery.

There are currently no federal restrictions on

harvesting dolphin, but the species is included in the coastal migratory pelagics management unit. The development of a dolphin and wahoo plan would take dolphin-fish out of the coastal migratory pelagics management unit, thus creating a new fishery management plan for these two species.

Many fishermen testified at the scoping meeting that the decision to manage dolphin should be postponed until more biological data is available. Others said if the council waits, it may be too late.

"This is the perfect fish," said council Executive Director, Robert Mahood, "It is fast growing, short lived, and a prolific spawner, which makes it difficult to over-fish," he said, "Difficult, but not impossible." Dolphin are a beautiful hard-fighting sportfish and an excellent eating fish popular in many restaurants as "mahi mahi". This makes them an increasingly inviting target for both sport and commercial fishermen.

The council has heard from a large number of fishermen urging the council to proceed with developing conservation measures for these species.

"Let's make this a management plan rather than a recovery plan," said Ted Forsgren of the Coastal Conservation Association.